

THE CONVERSATION

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Handshakes or punches? What goes on behind closed diplomatic doors

January 31, 2017 9.43am GMT

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It would have been fascinating to have been a fly on the wall when Boris Johnson called Donald Trump's special adviser and son-in-law Jared Kushner to express Theresa May's concern about the US policy which is being widely referred to as the "Muslim ban". What sort of language did the foreign secretary adopt? How high were the stakes vis-a-vis the "special R relationship" which only 24 hours ago had been reaffirmed by the US president and the UK prime minister?

We may have to wait for an answer until Johnson publishes his memoirs. Even then, details of what actually happens between diplomats behind closed doors or over a secure phone line are notoriously hard to discover. But history has given us a few examples where emotions ran high during meetings. According to some reports, the Iranian foreign minister, Javad Zarif, shouted at the US secretary of state, John Kerry, so frequently during meetings in 2014 over the nuclear deal with Iran that bodyguards were on standby to intervene.

Conservative blogs in the US interpreted it as a sign of weakness that Kerry simply endured the alleged rants. But remaining calm under pressure can be a powerful resource in international negotiations. Appearances do not necessarily tell us anything about substance.

Author



Holger Nehring

Professor in Contemporary European History, University of Stirling



Iranian foreign minister, Javad Zarif, (left) is reported to have shouted at the US secretary of state, John Kerry, while negotiating the nuclear deal in 2014. EPA/Andrew Gombert

By contrast, the infamous meeting between Adolf Hitler and Neville Chamberlain in Munich in September 1938 is said to have been conducted in a relatively amicable atmosphere. Chamberlain considered the preservation of peace of paramount importance and believed that it could be negotiated by conceding to Hitler's demands. Rarely has there been a more catastrophic assessment of intention and capability of the opposing side in negotiations, particularly given what each side knew about the other's political ideology.

When Jimmy met Helmut

You may have expected for Jimmy Carter, a Democrat president, and the West German social-democratic chancellor Helmut Schmidt in the 1970s and early 1980s to get on well with each other, given their shared values. But when they met during the economic summit in Venice in 1980 the situation came close to a physical altercation in a small hotel room.

According to a contemporaneous report: "The president [Carter] was very calm but firm throughout and the chancellor became less aggressive after the clash over Senator Biden's report." This may come as a surprise, as Schmidt presented himself to the outside world as a rational and self-controlled politician. Carter's memoirs, by contrast, describe Schmidt as a "paranoid child".



US president Jimmy Carter and West German chancellor Helmut Schmidt nearly came to blows during talks in Venice in the 1970s. Jack E. Kightlinger, White House photo

The value of such stories is not merely anecdotal. They tell us about the importance of using and controlling emotion for international negotiations and diplomacy. An assessment of the other party's likely reactions frequently forms part of the background briefings for diplomats and politicians on state visits. For example, a portrait of the Soviet leader Nikita Krushchev that the CIA prepared for John F. Kennedy in May 1961 warned the US president of Krushchev's short fuse. Krushchev was, the assessment argued: "Immoderately sensitive to slights" and was also prone to the "crudest form of barnyard humour" – which would give him something in common with the current occupant of the White House.

Who let the dog out?

Why does this matter? There are two aspects. First, anticipating how the other side might react is crucial in negotiations. This is why the diplomatic teams plan every aspect of the meeting, from position and background papers, to interpreters, to seating arrangements, to food and drink, in great detail.

And heads of state and their senior negotiators need to be able to understand the best buttons to press in order to exert the desired pressure. This isn't always achieved with words – Vladimir Putin famously disconcerted German chancellor Angela Merkel by releasing his large black Labrador during a meeting – with a photographer conveniently around to capture the scene – a unique way of exerting psychological power.



He's just a gentle giant really: Angela Merkel meets Vladimir Putin and his dog at the Kremlin in 2007. Presidential Press and Information Office

What does this mean for our understanding of the negotiations between Trump and May? One does not have to be a supporter of either to find some of the initial criticism of May's handling of the visit a bit premature. This visit was most likely one designed for both parties to get to know each other on a personal level rather than one aimed at any policy agreements. Those who criticised the prime minister for a lack of backbone towards Trump are overlooking this.

But May's supporters must also have been at least a bit embarrassed: almost immediately after a carefully choreographed visit that showed Trump holding hands with the prime minister, Trump signed an executive order banning people from seven Muslim countries, including those with visas and green cards, from entering the United States.

What message did this send to the prime minister who had just days before enthusiastically extolled the values the two countries have traditionally shared in a speech to Republican politicians? By symbolically holding hands with him, May now seems shackled to Trump's domestic policy agenda. She won't thank him for that.

🔍 Jimmy Carter Vladimir Putin Theresa May Donald Trump